

*The Syrian Experience:  
Resilience Throughout War  
And Beyond*

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Thank you to my father, mother and sister for making this possible and for everything they have done for me. To my entire family and community who has been next me through it all. Thank you to my outside mentor, in school advisor, interviewees and everyone who helped me during this process. To The Academy at Charlemont for providing me with this opportunity.

*Dedicated to my beloved grandmother, the most amazing person, who accepted everyone for who they are and persisted through all things*

## From Syria to the World

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# *1. Introduction*

Aleppo is located in the northwestern part of Syria. It is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. One of its most famous buildings is the citadel of Aleppo; having been around for more than hundreds of years and receiving thousands of visitors a year. The old Souk of Aleppo is also a known place where vendors are located, selling anything from spices and food to clothing and soaps. Aleppo is known for its laurel soap, olive oil among others.

Aleppo had to deal with the consequences of the Syrian Civil War as it greatly affected it. It has been suffering from civil war unrest for many years now. And currently, like the rest of the world, it is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic; there is not enough testing being done, vaccines have not reached the public yet and public spaces are having to shut down repeatedly to try and avoid another spike. However, that is not always possible because most people cannot afford to not go to work, or school. Additionally, Aleppo is also dealing with an economic crisis that has impacted the majority of the population. Because of that, food is unaffordable to many, often there is no gas for people to get and if there is, lines begin to form from early morning. So even though the effects of the war might have lessened, it is not without new challenges that Aleppo and its people prevail.

After the Civil War erupted, millions of Syrians had to emigrate and ended up all over the world; in Lebanon, more than 500,000 Syrians sought refuge in 2012. Other countries that hosted Syrians refugees and immigrants include Belgium, Germany, Canada among others.

## *1.1 Senior Project*

For my senior project, I chose to focus on the Syrian community and culture. I had many ideas about what I wanted to do, and it often changed, however I knew that I wanted to do something concerning Aleppians and Middle Easterners.

Since the Civil War, I became more aware, through personal experiences, that of my family and friends' and through various media outlets, that Middle Easterners are often falsely stereotyped. Aleppo received the most attention in 2012 when the war started. Most of its depictions were that of ruins, buildings on the ground, refugee camps, and "before and after" photos. The previous Aleppo was not very known by outsiders so when seeing the pictures of the destruction, they might not have anything to compare it to. Additionally, after many Syrians became displaced and went to live in another country, their identity was often linked with that of criminals. Syrians are often depicted negatively and the Arabic language as well. Oftentimes, their label surpasses their identity and thus they are judged and seen as it solely.

Therefore, for my senior project, I decided to showcase the Syrian community, culture, contribution and highlight important organizations and people. I wanted to show what Syria has to offer instead of what it's lacking like most people know it. I was able to accomplish this by writing articles about different topics; I wrote personal narratives, research articles and "spotlight" articles highlighting a specific organization or person. I also conducted interviews with numerous people, including some Syrians that have immigrated to several countries and others that are involved in various organizations. Along with that, I wanted to include photos and

videos of Aleppo, which were mostly taken recently by some of my family members, in order to show a side other than that of the destruction that is not frequently shown. I combined all of this into a website that I created, which can be accessed easily.

My goal for this project is to show another perspective when it comes to Aleppo and the Middle East. I hope to shed light on important topics that are not commonly known and show Syrians in a new way, other than what the media portrays them to be. The war has put Syrians in a box with false stereotypes associated with it, but that is merely the picture outsiders have seen. I hope I am able to show you the picture from the inside.

## *1.2 Process*

I started my senior project by working on creating the website, as it was my first time doing something of that sort. I slowly developed it. While continuing to work on it, I started researching and choosing what topics I wanted to write about in the “articles” section of my website. I spent a lot of my time writing these articles and coming up with new and interesting topics to write about. I also contacted people that I knew in order to interview them. I got in touch with various other people who are part of or work for an organization that I wrote about in one of my articles, in order to talk to and do an interview with them. For the “photos and videos” part of my website, I asked various family members to take them while they were in Aleppo as I wanted to show recent pictures and ones that are not commonly found online.

## *2. Articles*

For the “articles” section of my senior project, I wanted to write about various topics that are not as well known to outsiders. The first few articles are personal narratives where I share my own experiences, and that of my family’s and friends’ through the war and beyond. After those there are a couple of research articles about topics I found interesting, where I used my own research to write them. Finally, the last few articles draw attention to a specific organization, or group of people, that I came upon via various methods that I did not know prior to this project but I felt that they are conducting meaningful work that I needed to write about.

## *2.1.1 Article 1: The Reality of Having to Change Languages*

For me, speaking English and speaking in Arabic are two separate worlds. They each have their own culture and their own memories. When I think of English, I think of school, formal essays, meetings and important interviews. When I think of Arabic, I think of family, friends, and childhood; the songs that I grew up listening to, the stories my parents told me and my sister, and the phrases and expressions in Arabic that can't be translated into English. I am much more relaxed and comfortable when speaking in Arabic, not only because it is my native language, but also because there is no expectation for me to be perfect; I can mess up but I know no one will judge me for it. In English, I experience a constant amount of pressure, especially when speaking and I don't have time to be certain of what I want to say. This pressure to not mess up comes from people's beliefs that being from the Middle East makes a person uneducated and somehow inferior. I am conscious of every word I speak, making sure that it fits correctly and it articulates the nuances of what I'm thinking. I, along with my family, try to make the fewest mistakes possible but we naturally make lots of them because we are human.

Changing languages was one of the most difficult steps that we, along with millions of Syrians, had to go through. Having to translate what the person in front of you is saying into your native language, while thinking and translating your response back, all in a matter of seconds so you can give a timely response, is truly tiring. Everyday we speak to people whose only language is English, speaking our native Arabic only to each other. Daily encounters at school, work, grocery stores and everything in between, it's all English all the time. So when we all come home we feel a great deal of pressure lifted as we can now talk in Arabic with no stress or hassle.

This relief of pressure and stress is also present when we see each other, or anyone else, outside of the house who we can talk to in Arabic. After a constant day of having to talk in English, you can imagine the relief it is to be able to speak in Arabic. This is what my family and I feel. Non Arabic speakers however are not always comfortable with hearing Arabic, for a number of reasons and they don't realize what not allowing us to speak in Arabic truly does.

## *2.1.2 Article 2: Going to College*

As I start filling out applications for colleges, telling them about myself and my life, one question always stands as the trickiest to answer. “How do you identify yourself” or “what is your background.” I have never been able to answer “Middle Eastern.” It is rarely an option. I had not realized this issue until my sister brought it up. I couldn't agree more. We are forced to check “white” and then if there is a space, describe “my white background” as Middle Eastern. I usually opt to check the “others” box if it is an option. This is not an issue solely relevant to college applications. In fact, this exact question comes up again and again from filling out paperwork at the doctors’ to the U.S. Census. This box that might not seem like an important thing is a big deal for Middle Easterners. This “box” is our community. The community that is slowly being less represented, less known and more of an outcast. It is the smallest thing to make Middle Easterners feel represented and their voices heard. It is also important to recognize and account for these people because it gains them more representation, rights and acknowledges them for who they truly are rather than pushing them aside and combining them with others.

My experience while choosing which colleges I wanted to apply to, and hopefully attend, might have been different from many of my friends’. I didn’t focus primarily on what courses are offered, what sports team or clubs they might have. My foremost focus was going to a school where I would feel comfortable enough saying “I’m Syrian” or speaking in Arabic and not getting any hate in return. When applying, I had the constant thought that when admission officers will read my application and see the word “Syrian” written on it, they will immediately have a different idea of who I am, no matter my grades or any other factors. I was worried that they won’t see me as a person who can bring diversity to their campus, like some view

international students, rather they will see me as a person representing a group of people thought to be illiterate and inferior; all because of false stereotypes that are so widely accepted yet solely based on information from biased news sources.

## *2.1.3 Article 3: People of Syria*

Growing up in Aleppo and seeing how people acted towards each other gave me immense pride. During my years there, people were generous and caring. People would hand their neighbor a cup of coffee and spend time talking about their day. They would lend a helping hand even when they had barely anything to give themselves. This is the amount of care and love that spread through Aleppo.

One might think that the Syrian Civil War took away this generosity and compassion; but it only made the people and their connection between each other stronger. Neighbors helped others who lost their homes. They donated their money and time to strangers who were never thought of as strangers. A person whose house was destroyed was welcomed into another's home even though they did not have any money to pay the rent. The owner did not question it and with his kindness and generosity permitted this person to continue having a roof over their head. Another person who owned a store was willing to give out the items for free for those in need. No one hesitated to help others.

I don't live in Aleppo anymore, but thinking about the different places I have lived through, I proudly associate myself with my city of birth. Outsiders might see Aleppians as uneducated and poor because of the circumstances life handed them and the false stereotypes they are associated with. They might also mistreat them because of that. However, they don't know that this kindness and generosity will remain in them no matter what, even if they are going through the worst times. I am glad that there are people back home who will care for me if I am in need, despite not living there at the moment. I know I can count on them because those are the people that make Aleppo, Aleppo.

## *2.1.4 Article 4: The Marginalization of Middle*

### *Easterns*

When we tell people that we are from the Middle East, their expectation and value of us as human beings decreases. It saddens me because Middle Easterners are associated with stereotypes and are assumed to be uneducated. We are often ridiculed for not being fluent in English or for making mistakes while speaking.

People had to evacuate a war torn country, leave their family and home behind, establish a new life in a place they didn't know anything about. They also had to work day and night at jobs they didn't think they'd have, all in order to provide for themselves or their family and coming home exhausted, are only a few of the devastating experiences that Syrians have to deal with.

Syrians also had to learn a new language or new languages after spending years speaking Arabic, our native language but one that is threatening to some. A lot of people go to English classes after having a long day at work, instead of being able to take a break, just to lessen the chance of being ridiculed for making mistakes in their second, third, or fourth tongue. Others don't have the financial ability or the time to even attend these classes and have to deal with bigotry from their fellow humans.

Having people assume things about you without knowing your background beyond your nationality, having people not cooperate with you if you don't understand something, thinking less of you for making a language mistake, assuming that your worth of a person is less because of your native language, is detrimental to one's being yet few outsiders recognize this struggle.

## *2.2.1 Article 5: Syrian Contribution to the Arts*

Art is one of the most universal languages on the planet; a person does not need to know the artist's native language nor their life story because his work will do all the necessary talking. In Syria, it was similar. Galleries and exhibitions were popular in many cities and people always enjoyed visiting them. "Syria was considered one of the leading centers of art in the Middle East" (Behrooz). However, because of the Civil War, that is no longer truly the case; many galleries had to shut down leaving artists looking for new places to show their work. The war also made it necessary, in some cases, for artists to try and work in a field they were not experienced in in order to provide for themselves and their families. Those who decided to continue with their past profession were showing the world what life was like in a country being destroyed by war. Though some artists decided to stay in Syria, others moved to Lebanon and other Gulf States.

### **The Tajalliyat Gallery:**

[The Tajalliyat Gallery](#) in Damascus has been around for more than 10 years and it is a known gallery where many Syrian artists showcase their work. Even though the Tajalliyat Gallery has been affected by the Syrian Civil War, it did not shut down. Nevertheless, it did see a decrease of visitors as most people wanted to focus on their own lives and figure out what to do before going out and enjoying life as they had in the past. Today, as things have slightly calmed down and people have figured out what they need to do in order to survive, the gallery has been seeing a more steady flow of people, although it still does not compare to pre-war levels. One of the goals

of this gallery is to remain open even during the unsafe times in order to try and offer the people of Syria something to distract them as the world around them remains violent. As Behrooz explains, “in a country where artworks and historical sites are constantly being destroyed, galleries such as Tajalliyat are astounding examples of creative resilience.”(Behrooz). This gallery not only serves as an escape for people that are affected by the war, but it also gives a voice to the Syrian people to use to show the world that they are, despite the realities they've faced, still persevering. Not only are people living in Syria sharing their voices, but so too are Syrian refugees and displaced people all around the world. “All the art both within Syria and in the Syrian diaspora, [exhibit] a defiance of spirit that fights back against the tragedies of war and displacement, highlighting the endurance of art and creativity” (Behrooz).

### **Raghad Mardini:**

Unlike the Tajalliyat Gallery, Raghad Mardini, a Syrian artist, had to move to Beirut from Damascus because of the war. However, she did not let that stop her as an artist. She renovated an abandoned stable and turned it into a place where artists can showcase their own work, the [Art Residential Alley](#). Mardini invites two different artists each month to exhibit their work. At the end, she leaves one of the pieces of each artist's collection in hope to have a vast collection of paintings in the gallery showing various artists. Mardini's Gallery, Alley, is one of the few places where Syrian artists feel they have to show their work during the ongoing war. She came up with this idea because of that; she did not want the conflict to stop her or other artists. Instead, she wanted to communicate with the rest of the world, and she found a great way to do so. However, this did not come without its own challenges. Creating the Alley in Beirut was difficult because of the challenge of integrating into its society. Once again, Syrian artists persisted. Over time,

more galleries permitted Syrians to show their work, so Mardini was proud that she was able to help: “[The] artwork has helped to break down the barriers of resentment so that the Lebanese, who have experienced their own conflicts, no longer only see Syrians as workers, soldiers, refugees and a burden on society”. Instead she wants and is striving to show the world the creativeness and resilience of the Syrian people despite what they had to endure (Montgomery).

### **Reham Abo al-Nojoom:**

Another Syrian artist, [Reham Abo al-Nojoom](#), also had to leave Syria and her family behind. She went to Germany where she hoped she could continue being an artist. And to her luck, she met a German artist, Astrid Hilt, with whom she collaborated with on various projects and exhibitions. People only came to know Syria because of the war and the damages and the destruction it has created. Syria did not have the same acknowledgement before the war. ““Our hope was that the exhibit and surrounding cultural program, such as concerts with Syrian musicians and our German-Syrian choir, would help people realize that we’re much more alike than we are different.”” (Behrooz). With the collaboration of these two artists, they wanted to show others how even people with different backgrounds can be so much closer than we allow ourselves to think and get convinced by. Furthermore, even though it seems like everything is right on track, al-Nojoom ““worr[ies] about [her mother and younger sister] every minute”” who are still in Daraa, a city in Syria (Prufer).

### **Recreating Miniature Models of Important Buildings:**

Another group of artists from Syria came together to build miniature models of historical monuments in Syria, some which have been destroyed because of the war. The artists came up

with this initiative because they thought that the new generation growing up would not know these buildings; therefore, one thing the artists can do is recreate models of them. Recreating these models also creates a distraction for these artists to focus on their work instead of thinking of the reality for these buildings. Additionally, it is also a distraction for the people viewing their work and remembering the days where these were not only models but real life, in good shape, buildings. These artist's work further explains what is going on in Syria for the rest of the world to know. "While in reality they can't stop the destruction, they are at least preserving the memory of these sites for themselves and the refugees that see them" (Dunmore). This recreation preserves the buildings, the memories and the culture embedded in them so that others have a chance to know them as well. "It felt like a good way to get the message out, because art is a language that doesn't need to be translated" (Dunmore).

These artists are simply some examples of what the Syrian population tried to do when facing a civil war. They tried as best as they could to not let it destroy them by working on something that helps them do what they love and show outsiders what Syria and the war is like for them and it also helps other Syrians see through the darkness and stay resilient.

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## *2.2.2 Article 6: Syrian Contribution to Writing and Literature*

One of the things that Syria has consistently contributed to is writing, literature and language. Although not many countries might know it, Syria has persistently done so even while going through the civil war. Its literary tradition is part of its culture. Specifically, Arabic poetry has been a big part of and one of the oldest forms of Arabic literature. Syria has had a major contribution on Arabic poetry where it had its influence for hundreds of years. Some of Syria's most famous poets include [Nizar Quabbani](#), [Ali Ahmad Said Esber \(Adunis\)](#) who has had multiple Nobel Prize nominations in Literature, and Ulfat Idilbi, "one of Syria's most successful and beloved authors. Her novels largely revolve around the position of women in society" (Behrooz).

Arabic literature has been influenced by a variety of things including the poet's life, circumstances of the country, culture, religion and most recently the Syrian Civil War and its consequences. Writing, whether poems, novels or others, enables a person to share their story. It is yet another way to tell the world about one's experiences, and more importantly for Syrians, to express what they had to go through. Writing can easily be shared with people all over the world. And even if it is in a different language, a simple translation of the text can permit a person to understand more about the lives of people on the other side of the world.

It would seem that the Syrian Civil War would have significantly lessened the amount of literary texts written by Syrians. However, that was not the case. The war enabled and maybe motivated more writers to share their emotions and their stories. "Today, Syrians are taking with them their dreams, hopes, pains, memories and literature wherever their feet take them after the

disastrous events in their country” ( Behrooz). There might be a decrease in the number of Syrian poets and writers who are currently living in Syria, however that did not have a big effect on the number of novels and poems produced by them. Even if the civil war had to put their work on hold or let them emigrate, Syrians are still able to share their stories and lives with the world in any way they can. “Not so long ago, this land, Syria, was a hub of writing, authorship, creativity and translation. A few centuries ago, those writings contributed to shaping global civilization, and this literature still feeds into every aspect of science. Today is just like yesterday; Syrians are once again participating in shaping literature and thought throughout the worlds of arts and knowledge. The last few years have witnessed a great expansion of writing and translation in the field of Syrian literature” (Al-Khalaf).

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## *2.3.1 Article 7: Spotlight on NaTakallam*

[NaTakallam](#) or “we speak” is an online social enterprise that has helped over 100 refugees and displaced people find a job. However, it is unlike most platforms as displaced people are the tutors and not the students. NaTakallam has also helped over 4000 people who wanted to learn a new language, needed help with translation or wanted a conversation partner in another language. This is an important enterprise that sheds light on refugees and allows them to live their lives like any other human being. It is also a platform where people have the opportunity to learn about the culture from people all over the world.

NaTakallam is co-founded by Aline Sara, a Lebanese who wanted to practice conversational Arabic. Around the same time, the number of people getting displaced because of the Syrian Civil War was rapidly increasing and a large number of them went to Lebanon. However, it was difficult to attain a work permit especially for Syrian refugees, so most ended up without a job, and therefore no source of income. Seeing that, Sara co-founded NaTakallam with Reza Rahnema in hopes that they could help the refugee population. The initial idea was that displaced Syrians or Syrian refugees would teach interested people Arabic and have conversations with them over Skype. NaTakallam became popular shortly after and it expanded. Now, it offers a variety of services including the chance to learn Arabic, Armenian, French among others. It also offers translation services from and into a variety of languages. NaTakallam stands out amongst others due to the fact that the main people employed are refugees or displaced people.

All of NaTakallam’s programs, whether that is learning a new language, translation or others, are taught by refugees or displaced people. After being displaced from their home country, this platform allows them to work and gives them an opportunity to do so with

something they already know; their own language. People who work with NaTakallam and those who learn with it, have the chance to see other cultures and countries through the computer. It allows both the student and tutor to experience and talk to people from countries they might never have thought of. It is also important to realize that the people who chose to participate in any of NaTakallam's programs are given the chance to talk to a person who has been through many challenges, and they get the story first hand. It is different from hearing a refugee's stories from the news.

Refugees or displaced people are often thought of as “people living in a camp, that’s it” (NaTakallam: Press). However, this platform allows them to share their experiences with people all over the world. Their story is not getting altered, as it sometimes does in the media, because it is told by them. NaTakallam not only benefits them because it allows them to work, but it also gives them a space to know that they are normal human beings just like anyone else. Their status does not define them, and should not be used against them, for a job or anything else.

NaTakallam is also accessible to most of the world due to it being an online platform. Many universities have taken advantage of its offerings, offering it to students and including them in their courses. Numerous schools have also chosen to bring a guest speaker, from NaTakallam, to talk about their story, experiences and answer questions. NaTakallam is helping to build bridges between different countries, cultures and people. It is a platform that allows refugees and displaced people to know that they are still humans despite their label.

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## 2.3.2 Article 8: *Spotlight on Unpacked: Refugee Baggage*

“Close your eyes. What comes to your mind when I ask you to think about a Syrian refugee? About the Middle East? Was it bombs that you saw? People fleeing for their lives? Terrorists?”  
— Mohamad Hafez

Oftentimes Middle Eastern refugees are associated with the word “terrorists.” The label that they receive after risking their lives to get to a safer place is what associates them with that word. Listening to the stories that these refugees have to share however, will shed light on things that are not often talked about when it comes to them, and this is exactly what the project [“Unpacked: Refugee Baggage”](#) tries to do.

Mohamad Hafez, a Syrian architect, was born in Damascus and continued his education in the U.S. Working alongside Ahmed Badr, an Iraqi refugee, who attends Wesleyan University, they have created a project that enabled them to share the voices of refugees from the other side of the world.

“Unpacked: Refugee Baggage” is the project that they have both been dedicating their time into. Badr interviews people who had to leave their home countries — from Afghanistan, Congo, Syria, Iraq and Sudan — and listens to their stories and experiences. In an exhibit, the audio clip from the interview goes along with its own suitcase that includes the work from Hafez who “sculpturally re-creates rooms, homes, buildings and landscapes that have suffered the ravages of war” (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage). Their stories are also shared on their website

where people can continue to read about the refugees' experiences. There have been numerous exhibits with their work including most recently one in 2017 in New Haven, Connecticut and another one in 2020 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Hafez started this project as therapeutic work for himself, once the Syrian Civil War erupted. However, after seeing his brother in law, a successful businessman in Damascus become a refugee in Sweden, living in a camp, and with the information associated with being a refugee, that image was not tolerable by Hafez. So Hafez thought he could share his work with the world, with the help from Badr. "There is an impression that immigrants and refugees come from an impoverished background" says Hafez (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage). Frequently, it is thought that refugees do not have anything to lose when leaving their home country. Outsiders do not know, possibly because of lack of mention, that refugees are risking their lives when doing so and they need to leave everything behind; their family, friends, home, job and basis of their lives. People often educate themselves through news outlets or the media, but it seems that something is missing, people that are personally affected by the war are oftentimes not heard or listened to because "how do you talk with your mouth shut?" (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage). The goal of this project is to try and change that perception by giving "a voice to the voiceless: normal, kind, genuine and impressive people that society labels as marginal and insignificant" (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage).

The work that goes into each suitcase is specified for that person. After hearing their stories, Hafez tries to recreate a site that was important to the person, who was affected by the war. The intention of his artwork is to present what was reality for those refugees without changing anything about them. "[He] invites the spectator to simultaneously experience horror, pain, and awe" (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage).

Sometimes, people do not have the choice but to become refugees and they are forced to deal with the consequences of what those words bring to them. Hafez and Badr's hope is to humanize the word "refugee." This project is intended to change the perception of what it means to be a refugee. Like Hafez says, everyone has had different, tough pasts and they all bring their baggage. Everyone lives out of their own suitcase, and refugees are no exception. People who have been interviewed for this project are still contributing to society in one way or another. Their label did not stop them as it does not define anyone. It should not be "you're an immigrant, period" (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage).

Through their work, Hafez and Badr are expanding people's minds and thoughts about refugees. People are hearing the stories and personal experiences from the person impacted by the war themselves. "We all fear the unknown but all it takes is a cup of coffee and a suitcase" to get to know others and not base our thoughts and ideas solely on labels (Unpacked: Refugee Baggage).

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### *2.3.3 Article 9: Spotlight on Paper Airplanes*

“At a time when much of the conversation about Syrian refugees is focused on closing borders and keeping them out, Bailey Ulbricht has found a way to bring people together through simple conversation” (Carleton Admissions).

While in Reyhanli, Turkey in 2013, Bailey Ulbricht was a college student with a goal of getting to know new people, cultures and traditions. However, she did not expect that this trip would lead to forming a well known organization.

On her trip, she encountered many displaced Syrians as at the time, the Syrian Civil War had recently erupted. Ulbricht began teaching children English even though that was not the intention of the trip. Once she came back to the U.S. Ulbricht launched [Paper Airplanes](#), a non profit organization that provides various programs, helping conflict affected individuals especially. Paper Airplanes is yet another organization that has aided displaced Syrians as well as others, to get back on their feet after having to deal with the consequences of war.

Paper Airplanes offers English and Turkish programs, Youth Exchange, Women in Technology, Citizen Journalism and Student Advising. The language programs help conflict-affected people, mainly those from Syria, who otherwise don't have access to an education due to the war. Additionally, as Paper Airplanes is mainly accessed through different online platforms, students from all over the world have access to it. These programs also allow for older individuals to strengthen their language skills before applying to a new job. “[Paper

Airplanes'] mission is to bridge gaps in language, higher education, and professional skills training for conflict-affected individuals. By harnessing virtual learning technology and the benefits of peer-to-peer connections, we seek to provide a means of pursuing educational and employment opportunities" (Paper Airplanes).

Women in Technology is another engaging program that the organization offers. Due to jobs slowly becoming more digitized, Paper Airplanes wants to empower marginalized women especially, to be able to work. Most of these women have many other responsibilities and may not have access to training for a new job or skill. Therefore, this helps them right from their own home and allows them to pursue a remote job in the future. There are currently three courses offered in this program including Business Analytics, Web Development and Python Programming. After being provided with the opportunity of attending Demo Day for these courses, I can say that these women have worked extensively for 10 weeks and were able to become more familiar and comfortable with coding and various other programming languages. College students all the way to mothers were involved in this course and it demonstrates how widely spread out Paper Airplanes' aid goes.

Paper Airplanes is providing aid to marginalized people that is easily accessible from their own home and does not require them to sacrifice anything else in return. The war has affected them so much, that having an organization like this enables them to persevere and support them through their future endeavours.

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## 2.3.4 Article 10: Spotlight on Capernaum

*Capernaum*, meaning chaos, is a movie that became so known for its story and intention, that it was shared globally. Available on both Youtube and Amazon, it was nominated for many prestigious awards including Best Foreign Language Film at the 2019 Academy Awards, the Golden Globes' Best Picture – Foreign Language and reaching the Oscars. It has won many awards like best actor in the International Antalya Film Festival and Un Certain Regard prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

The idea behind the movie came from Nadine Labaki, a Lebanese actress and producer. After seeing a mother and her son on the streets of Beirut, she thought about how they don't have any place to live, no roof over their head. Labaki was also aware of the amount of refugees that Lebanon had, especially Syrian refugees, making it the world's biggest refugee host considering its population. Labaki wanted to address issues concerning displaced people, the injustice they face as well as other important topics in the world today. As Labaki explains: "These kids are facing extreme neglect. I see them all around every day, and everybody just feels completely powerless. And that's maybe why we turn away. I wanted to be in the head of these kids and understand what happens when you turn away and the kid goes around the corner and disappears from your vision. Who are their parents? What are they thinking" (Ritman)? Labaki wanted to show the world what was happening to these people and how few opportunities they have to make their lives better. She wanted to make a difference, and she succeeded.

One of Labaki's main wishes was to find actors to play out the story with passion and emotion. However, after trying to understand the different experiences these refugees and

displaced people had to go through, she knew that there was no one better to tell the world about their experiences but themselves. So, Labaki's team tried to find refugees who had the desire to be in the movie and the courage and dedication to share their stories. One of *Capernaoum's* main character, was Zain Al Rafeea, a teenager who was a Syrian refugee living in Lebanon.

Zain moved from his home in Daraa, a city in southern Syria, in 2012 when he was just seven years old and came to Lebanon with his family. His parents had to make various sacrifices in order to keep providing for their family and keep them safe. Unfortunately, that meant that Zain was unable to continue to go to school for that same reason but multiple others as well. When Labaki's team members were searching for someone to play the lead role in the movie, they were looking for someone who had similar experiences to the character, and Zain fitted perfectly. They already knew he was going to be the hero of the movie, as Labaki describes him (Abu Khaled and Mawad). Zain's character in the movie is an undocumented boy who is living in Beirut but has to work to support his family. He eventually decides to sue his parents, blaming them for all the injustice and lack of opportunities he had in his life. He becomes homeless and seeks refuge with other vulnerable people he meets.

Zain did not have any experience acting, however Labaki slowly worked with him, and all the other people who were in the movie. His dedication and emotions behind all the challenges he had to go through helped him become a critical part of the movie. Labaki left the cast the liberty to add in their own words, expressions and ideas as this was their story to tell. And this is what ultimately differed Labaki's movie from any other that addressed similar topics.

After the movie gained attention and popularity, Zain's family got a welcome boost, "with the help of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, they were approved for resettlement to Norway" (Abu Khaled and Mawad). It was a new beginning that less than one percent of refugees

families have a chance to get. Although not publicly affirmed yet, Zain might also be playing a part in Marvel's *Eternal*.

Capernaum not only helped the cast with their lives, but they also helped the world see refugees and displaced people in another way. It was not the media or the news that was telling them a story about refugees or displaced people. It was the refugees or displaced people themselves sharing their stories and experiences with the world. Opening their eyes on the injustice they face and corrupt systems that mistreats them. After coming back from traveling with Zain for the movie Labaki intends on addressing this problem. She adds: "We need to start talking. Some people in the government have the good will to do something, but they don't know where to start, what to do. I have been researching for such a long time that I know the failures. We need to brainstorm. We have to start with the system. Now I need to find people who can help with the foundation who have done this before. In a few months when all of the traveling is done, we will start there" (Bradley).

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### *3. Interviews*

I wanted to add an interview section in my project as I wanted to share more stories and experiences that Syrians went through and what they are going through currently. I interviewed Syrians with different backgrounds in order to draw a connection between the different stories and see the similarities and differences that they had to go through. I was also able to get in touch with people who work for or are part of different organizations in order to share another perspective, different than just reading or writing about it. I also want to add that a few of the interviews are anonymous.

I chose to keep the interviews in a simple format, and I left the product as an interview transcript and an audio recording of it if it is available. I decided on that format because I think it is important to hear people's stories from themselves. I did not want to change their responses to fit in an article that I was writing or anything else. So many of the stories from displaced people are changed in one way or another and I did not want to do that. I wanted to let them share their experiences and let it shine by itself.

### *3.1 Interview with Zein: Transcript*

Cristy: Can you talk about how and why you left Syria. And describe the differences or similarities between where you are living now and Syria.

Zein: So, I left Syria in 2012 because of the war. I first moved to Lebanon and then I moved to the U.S. for college. I'd say the hardest part about leaving the Middle East wasn't so much related to the cultural shift nor was it a language difficulty; I went to an English speaking school in Syria and in Lebanon as well. The hardest part was mostly living alone cause I had to leave my family in order to move to the U.S. and just adjust to the change of living by myself, away from my parents, having to grow up at such a young age and depend on myself almost fully. I feel like that's definitely something that a lot of people who left Syria because of the war had to learn how to do, to become self reliant and independent. They didn't really have the privilege of living a childhood; they just had to adapt. It wasn't really a choice.

Cristy: What do you miss the most about Syria?

Zein: What I miss the most about Syria is being surrounded by family. Every friday we would spend it at either my aunt's house or my grandma's house. We'd have a gathering where all of my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, everyone was there and now each one of us is in a different country, living in a different country around the world. Some of them I haven't seen in over 7 years. So just going from being surrounded by familiar faces, by family and friends and having to create a new life with new people who weren't necessarily related to you, I think that's something I miss the most because I know that that's probably the one thing I can't get back where as everything else you can regain through shared experience, through learning how to adapt, but you can't get family back, you can't get people back.

Cristy: Do you think people you know in the U.S. have an accurate image of Syria? Why or why not?

Zein: I can't really generalize and say that all people don't know about Syria, all people don't know what the right image of Syria is but for the most part when I google "Syria" I get war-torn images of broken down buildings and Syria has been there, Syria is one of the oldest countries in the world, and to have 10 years, 10 very prominent years, define what it means to be Syrian or define the cultural

or historical aspect of Syria is very unfair. Even as an unbiased, non syrian, if I had known what Syria is like and how rich it is in history and in culture and the people, how generous and kind the people are, it would definitely, definitely been at the top of my list to travel to.

Cristy: Have you been treated differently because you said you were Syrian or spoke arabic? If so, how?

Zein: I'd like to think that any comment that was said about me being Syrian or Arab was not of malicious intent. But I think some of them stem out of ignorance where there's the assumption that you can't be Syrian and American at the same time. That being Syrian holds you back from integrating into the U.S. culture and that's one of the things I had to encounter, and I don't think that that's because anyone was trying to be so blatantly rude but it stems from a place of lack of knowledge. And I think that's fair because not everyone has visited Syria and everything on the news and everything online, there isn't the right information available so I can't really expect everyone to know what it's like to be Syrian or to understand what I'm capable of. But I definitely think that some of the things that were said such as assuming that I can't speak English properly or hearing my accent and asking where I'm from. Like the first response to telling people I'm Syrian, for the most part, be "I'm sorry." And in my head it's usually like why are you sorry, I'm very proud of my heritage, I'm very proud to be Syrian. So just associating the words "Syrian" and "Syria" with negative connotations is usually what I tend to face.

Cristy: What would you like the world to know about Syrians?

Zein: What I would like people to know about Syrians is something we've only come to see after Syrians were dispersed around the world, how hard working they are and how every country they've been to; I've worked at refugee camps in Lebanon and in Turkey and just seeing how survival mode works when parents have 7 children and they're doing everything they can, working every single day, taking every opportunity they can, rather than just expecting people to just give them the resources that they need. That's one of the things that I know. Again, whether it's at refugee camps or in the most prestigious colleges around the world, it's one of the most common traits that I've seen in Syrians regardless of their age, or their social status or whatever it is. It's how they never settle for anything less and they're always willing to work for what they get.

## 3.2 Interview with Anonymous 1

*Interviewee is staying anonymous. They are around 55 years old, Syrian, who moved to the U.S. before 2015 because of the war*

Cristy: Can you talk about your exit story?

Interviewee: I left when it was unsafe for me and my family. I sold some stuff that I knew I wouldn't be able to take with me. I gathered my things and I traveled to the safest country closest to Syria. And from there I went to the U.S.

Cristy: What do you miss the most about Syria?

Interviewee: I miss a lot of things. I miss my home, my family, my properties, my work, my friends.

Cristy: How does your life at the moment (people around you, job, location...etc) compare to the life you had in Syria?

Interviewee: It's very different. Instead of being the employer, I am an employee.

Cristy: How did the language change affect you?

Interviewee: It's a different language and culture. So I understand most of what people say, but not all the details.

Cristy: Do you think the people you know in the U.S have an accurate image of Syria? Why or why not?

Interviewee: You can find some people who do, but it's not like my friends in my country. That's because of the different culture, attitude and everything else, all together.

Cristy: What would you like the world to know about Syrians?

Interviewee: The Syrian people are very kind and generous and humble and they like others; no matter who they are and where they come from. And they are friendly; if you meet them, you feel like you have known them from a long time ago.

### 3.3 Interview with Anonymous 2

*Interviewee is staying anonymous. They are a Syrian college student, studying in the U.S.*

Cristy: Can you talk about your exit story?

Interviewee: I remember the day when we said goodbye to my grandma and aunts. And I also remember my mom preparing everything. It wasn't so much a "goodbye", it was more of a "see you later". I was excited to go and travel; we went to Disneyland and lived our childhood normally. The worst part was that the feeling that we weren't coming back was slowly building up; it was unexpected. I always ask myself if it is easier to not be able to come back because of something like a war or to willingly make the decision to not come back and leave your family behind?

Cristy: What do you miss the most about Syria?

Interviewee: I miss Nadi Halab. I also miss the fact that you can take a short drive and see your whole family or friends. I miss the strong community. What I miss the most are things that aren't physical but rather the feelings; knowing that my grandparents are safe, being financially stable, knowing that you have everything you need around, especially because your parents have built their lives there. And the things you will not get back, the people you won't get to see.

Cristy: Do you think the people you know in the U.S have an accurate image of Syria? Why or why not?

Interviewee: I can't generalize but for the people around me, I don't think they have an accurate image but I don't think that's important. You don't need to get sympathy from your background. Instead, you need to represent yourself well and show that you are a good person and part of the reason you are good is because of your experiences, background and country.

Cristy: Have you been treated differently because you said you were Syrian or spoke Arabic? If so, how?

Interviewee: In college, you are praised for it. People there are educated, and they value that

you know multiple languages. Also, in college, I realized that some hesitate to talk in Arabic when other groups of people are also talking in Arabic, which honestly I don't understand why.

Cristy: How did the language change affect you?

Interviewee: For the better I think. But it was hard to express myself in English because I considered it a formal language.

Cristy: How did you deal with the added responsibilities that you had to take while still very young, because of the war?

Interviewee: When you are young you don't really feel those added responsibilities. It makes you a better person. Part of me is grateful that I had to take on more responsibilities because of it as it made me the person I am today. It's sometimes hard but what can you do? You can't just focus on the hard.

Cristy: What would you like the world to know about Syrians?

Interviewee: To not to forget us when talking about other minorities as Arabs are also a minority. To be knowledgeable about what is happening to Arab countries. Actually understand what is happening in Syria and not just surface level understanding. And not to put a sign saying you support them while also supporting actions that destroy them.

### 3.4 Interview with Dina from NaTakallam

Cristy: Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to interview with me. So I'll introduce myself

a bit, my name is Cristy, I'm originally from Syria, we moved to Lebanon but now we are in the U.S. I am a high school senior in MA and so for my senior project, we have to do a year long project about something that interests you and coming from a Syrian/Middle Eastern background, I thought it would be interesting for me and others to do something about Syrian culture and community especially because there are so many stereotypes that I wanted to offer another perspective, maybe one that is not as well know. If you want to start by saying a little bit about NaTakallam and your role.

Dina: First thank you for reaching out! So about me, my name is Dina and I am the executive assistant to the CEO of NaTakallam, Aline Sara. Aline is the co-founder and CEO of NaTakallam and she herself is originally Lebanese but her parents immigrated to NYC because of the Lebanese Civil War. She mostly spoke English and French at home and she had worked in Beirut as a journalist. While she was there, she wanted to practice her Arabic with someone who spoke local, colloquial Arabic. She had an idea where she thought to herself that she wanted to learn how to speak colloquial Arabic but not modern standard Arabic as that is not used in everyday life but rather in reading or writing something formal. She had the idea when she was in Lebanon and there were millions of refugees coming from Syria to Lebanon and she realized that there are people who have skills who are unable to work in Lebanon. So she thought how can she combine these two things? That's what started the idea behind *NaTakallam*. We set up programs that connect people worldwide with the Syrian refugees who would teach them Arabic. It was a good source of income for the refugees while doing something they already know. From a very small project it became a full social enterprise. Since 2015, we now work with refugees and displaced people all over the world, we have added more languages spoken by refugees and have more departments.

Through *NaTakallam*, the people that we work with can access 3 different streams of income. Those are either by being a language tutor, translator or interpreter, or being a cultural guest speaker. We have a program that's called "Refugee Voices," and we have a lot of partnerships with K-12 and universities and perhaps your school might be interested in hosting too. We have partnered with Yale, Duke, Colombia where interested students are tuning in and hearing their stories. There

are so many conferences about and for refugees but seldomly you'll find an actual refugee on the panel, so we want them to be heard and be paid for it of course.

Cristy: How do you reach interested refugees, especially in the Middle East?

Dina: The way we recruit refugees and displaced people we do through our extensive network and partnerships with NGOs on the ground. So we have partnerships with UNHCR and other aid agencies who are working with the vulnerable displaced people. People have also spontaneously filled an application and we would contact them after. We don't ask for people to be fluent in English but just need to be able to exchange a couple emails and any issues that might come up. Some former refugee tutors became staff on *NaTakallam*.

Cristy: Do you know the age range of these refugees or displaced people?

Dina: The age varies but we have teachers who are in their early twenties all the way into their sixties. So it's a variety of people with different backgrounds and cultural backgrounds.

Cristy: Do you guys provide any other aid or support to the language tutors, translators or guest speakers?

Dina: As NaTakallam we don't provide any other aid but we do have a community where we try to improve the digital skills with the people we are working with so that after they leave NaTakallam, they are better equipped. NaTakallam is all online so everyone had to learn the online platforms and for us it might be easy but we take it for granted cause it might not be for others. And we have people from different backgrounds, from doctors to people in their early twenties. We have also helped, through local partnerships and organizations, secure food boxed with the help of the refugees who were in Beirut, after the blast last August.

Cristy: Is there a specific syllabus that the tutors need to follow for the conversation sessions ?

Dina: We have 2 offers, one is conversation sessions for all our languages and then the other is a curriculum option for Arabic. Conversation sessions are made to be flexible and based on the needs of the student. Our youngest student is 4 and our oldest is 82. So it really varies and it is tailored based on what the student wants. For those who are looking for more structured lessons, we have partnered with

Cornell University's Arabic department, technically the head of the department, who created the integrated Arabic curriculum.

Cristy: How do you think the world perceives refugees and displaced people and how does NaTakallam differ from that?

Dina: There is a cultural understanding. Because you are not just learning a language but you're also getting to know the person and if they are willing to share their stories and experiences too. COVID was a time of isolation but for most of these people, being in a camp can also be isolating. For them, they were able to travel the world by talking to their students. People see refugees as passive recipients of aid with no agency over their own future. When we were first pitching NaTakallam and saying we will hire refugees to teach languages, nobody could wrap their heads around it. They would say "oh, you mean we are teaching refugees English?" and Aline would explain that they would be teaching others. So this idea of refugees being passive recipients of aid is from the global community. And it needs to change. NaTakallam basically dismantles this idea because get to speak with someone who is actually from that part of the world that you hear so much about but yet have never spoken to someone from there. When we have our refugee speakers talk to middle schoolers especially, we've seen that there is a cultural understanding even more. Students have written that they would have lived their lives hating people who they've never seen but all it takes is a conversation to understand that people are all the same.

Cristy: You already talked about this a little bit, but what would you like the world to know about refugees?

Dina: Like we said, that they are not simply passive recipients of aid and society has nothing to lose from including educated people who are displaced into their economies. All displaced people should be included and for there to be programs that allow such economic inclusivity. They need access to a livelihood, that's where you begin to own your own life again. And also, not all people like to be called refugees, as some were former refugees, and most don't like that label as it has a negative connotation as we mentioned. Displacement is not going away anytime soon, even if all wars end, because of climate change, displacement will continue. So we have to have a better way of dealing with such a situation than having people in a camp for 40 years.

# 4. Learning Journal

8/20/2020

- After seeing a video online of a person traveling to countries that are not so popular, and Syria being one of them, I started brainstorming different ideas that might interest me for my senior project and those included:
    - Cancer awareness
    - Mental health/Stress awareness
    - COVID-19 help in Syria
    - Interviewing Syrians all over the world
- 

9/2/2020

- I met with Mr. Almeida and shared with him the numerous ideas that I had for my senior project. A challenge was that I was interested in many things, especially concerning Syria including COVID-19, addressing false stereotypes, talking about Syrian culture and sharing people's experiences after the civil war.
- 

9/7/2020

- I talked to Cayanne, and she shared various ideas that can combine what I was thinking and interested in including education and refugees who are based in Lebanon. She also shared with me multiple organizations that I might be able to work with for my senior project. Those include Paper Airplanes and Syrian Youth Organization.
- 

9/12/2020

- I researched and looked further into the organizations that Cayanne shared with me, seeing what I can possibly do and how to get involved.
  - I emailed the Syrian Youth Organization as they had an awareness campaign where you have access to workshops, talks, and articles about Syrians.
  - However, after waiting for a couple of weeks and emailing them a second time, no one responded.
- 

9/25/2020

- I got in touch with another organization that provided aid to refugees and helped them in any way they could. They also had several donation based projects.
  - I ultimately decided that it was not what I was looking for.
- 

10/7/2020

- After thinking about various ideas and what I wanted to do, my father gave me the idea of building a website that combines various things that I was interested in. I quickly like the idea and I thought I can include articles that I wrote, I can interview people to hear about their experiences and then I can also add photos and videos of Aleppo. The website permitted me to combine several different things that I was interested in.
- 

10/9/2020

- I had my weekly meeting with Mr.Gay where I shared with him the organizations that I contacted and how they either did not respond or it did not work out. He suggested that I can do something by myself and get inspired from the work of these organizations. Writing articles was also one of his ideas, similar to what the Syrian Youth Organization does, and then I could possibly publish them somewhere.
- 

10/16/2020

- I had my weekly meeting with Mr.Gay and we discussed various places that do similar things to what I am intersted in for my senior project and possible involvement with organization that work with Syrian reliefs. There are also refugees in Massachusetts that I can find an organization to work with.
  - I also shared the idea of interviewing Syrians all over the world, and we thought that that could be a project by itself or it could support other ideas as well.
- 

10/23/2020

- I started looking for potential templates if I decide to create a website
    - I saw multiple sources but I found wix.com to be pretty good for what I was thinking of doing
  - I was also thinking of potential people that I can ask be my outside mentor
    - I contacted Cayanne for potentially being my outside mentor
-

10/27/2020

- Cayanne agreed to be my outside mentor!
  - I decided to go ahead with the website idea
    - I also decided on writing articles about various topics that may not be commonly talked about
    - I wanted to interview different people so they can share their stories and experiences
    - I also wanted to add photos and videos of Aleppo as I see it because the media does not always show that side of Aleppo
    - I might also do an online or printed book where I combine all of these and the learning journal together
- 

10/30/2020

- Brainstormed ideas that I can write about for the articles
    - I knew I wanted to write about my experiences, but I also wanted to research more and write about that as well
  - I started to think who I could potentially interview for my project
    - I would have a transcript and maybe audio or video of the interview
- 

11/3/2020

- Today I mostly focused on the website portion. As I have never done anything like this, I took some time to look around wix.com and the different formats and templates they have. Once I chose my template, I looked around at the different tools and what or how you can add them
- 

11/13/2020

- I had my meeting with Mr. Gay
    - We talked about the learning journal and what it should consist of
    - We discussed various topics that would be interesting to write about
- 

11/18/2020

- I had my meeting with my outside mentor, Cayanne. We checked in and I updated her on the website building process as well as the different ideas for the articles.
-

11/20/2020

- I updated Mr. Gay on what I have been working on
  - I started writing article 1 about the idea of changing languages and having almost two different personalities when speaking each language.
- 

11/24/2020

- I finished my rough draft for the first article about changing languages
  - I continued working on the website and thinking of what sections I wanted to have
- 

11/25/2020

- I have a final draft of the first article
  - I decided to break my website into 6 sections: home, about, articles, interviews, images/videos and a feedback section
- 

11/27/2020

- I worked more on the website, creating sections within the general structure
  - I reviewed article 1 and shared it with Mr. Gay
  - I researched various organizations that I can potentially share my website with later
- 

12/2/2020

- I started adding some information to the home page on the website
    - I wanted to add background information about Aleppo specifically and how it is in the Middle East but also how it is currently
- 

12/4/2020

- I met with Mr. Gay
    - We talked about writing an introduction article so I can explain what I am doing and what my goals are for this project
    - We brainstormed who I can interview
      - People who work in NGOs or work with refugees
      - People who are Syrians themselves
- 

12/8/2020

- I brainstormed ideas for second article
    - I wanted to continue sharing some of my experiences
    - I decided to write about the exclusions of Middle Easterners
- 

12/9/2020

- I brainstormed more ideas for future articles
  - I started writing the second article
- 

12/11/2020

- I met with Mr. Gay
    - We discussed edits for the first articles
    - I share with him who I might want to interview
    - We discussed more details if I decide to publish any of my articles separately
- 

12/15/2020

- I continued writing the second article about the exclusion of Middle Easterners.
  - I started formulating questions that I wanted to ask for the interviews
- 

12/19/2020

- I worked on the website
    - The mobile version of the website was not working but I wasn't sure why Worked on who I want to interview
  - I finalized a list of the people I wanted to interview
- 

12/22/2020

- I reviewed the first article after Mr. Gay left some comments and feedback
  - I checked in with my outside mentor and updated her with what I have been doing
    - I also made a folder that I shared with her that I put everything I've done in so she can also leave feedback
- 

12/23/2020

- I shared the second article with Mr. Gay
- I figured out how to get pictures and videos of Aleppo without using the internet as much

- I asked family and friends who are there to take photos as I think whenever someone looks up Aleppo, they find pictures of destruction or “before and after” photos. So I wanted to offer up another perspective.

---

12/27/2020

- I decided that for the third article, I would talk about the generosity and compassion that the people of Syria have. So I started with an outline for that article and I began with the rough draft

---

12/30/2020

- I finished the draft for the third article
  - I shared it with both Mr. Gay
- I also worked on the website, adding information in the “about” page

---

1/1/2021

- I added interview questions for the each interviewee
- I looked at other websites so I can get a sense of what I want my website to look like at the end
- I started gathering pictures and videos after my cousins sent me some

---

1/3/2021

- I shared bother articles 2 and 3 with my outside mentor to get feedback
- I brainstormed more ideas for articles

---

1/4/2020

- Thinking where to publish and which organizations
- I researched new topics which include the blast in Beirut and the culture in Aleppo

---

1/5/2021

- I got more photos and videos from other cousins that I added to the website

---

1/7/2021

- I worked on second draft of article 1

- I divided the previous draft of article 1 into article 1 and article 4 i
  - I continued working on article 4
- 

1/12/2021

- I worked on the mobile version of the website
    - I fixed the issue that was recurring when I was opening the mobile version
  - I researched blogs and articles that people have written about the Syrian community and culture
- 

1/13/2021

- I formatted the “articles” page on the website and added where I want each article to go
  - I contacted someone to possibly interview them
- 

1/17/2021

- I looked at Mr.Gay’s edit for article 1, 2, 3
  - I continuing worked on article 4
- 

1/21/2021

- I prepared for my meeting with Mr.Gay tomorrow
  - After talking with Cayanne, we decided that the next couple of articles should be more research focused
    - I looked into what topics I can write about
- 

1/22/2021

- I had my meeting with Mr.Gay
    - We talked about the edits from the articles
      - I was having trouble with article 4
    - Discussed the different lengths of my articles and what I ultimately wanted it to look like
    - Discusses the interview portion of the project
- 

1/24/2021

- I worked on an introductory article explaining why I want to do this so if I decide to do so, I can put it in newspapers and organizations along with my website
-

1/27/2021

- Today, I worked a lot on the website: fixing and adding things and sections. I also filled it more
- 

1/28/2021

- I worked on article 4 again, and I tried to resolve the problem that I was having with this one
- 

1/29/2021

- I met with Mr. Gay
    - We came up with a schedule to be done by the due date for the project
    - Discusses goals and what I needed to focus on
  - I also met with Cayanne
    - We talked about where to go from here and the different research articles I can do. We talked about art, writing, language, calligraphy, sciences as potential research topics
- 

2/1/2021

- I continued assembling things for the website
  - I was able to finalize article 4
    - Sent it to Mr.Gay for feedback
- 

2/5/2021

- I checked in and updated Mr.Gay
    - I contacted more people to potentially interview and I am waiting for responses
- 

2/8/2021

- Met with Mr.Gay
  - Discussed what I needed to do when having the interview and what questions would be good to ask
  - We also talked about the book that I would do, and we decided since I already have the website, that having an online book with everything in it would make the most sense

---

2/15/2021

- I contacted a person to interview
  - They agreed to do so! I explained what the project was and sent the questions. Now, I'm waiting for the answers!

---

2/16/2021

- I met with Cayanne
  - I sent her all the articles that I currently have
  - We talked about the edits that I needed to do

---

2/18/2021

- I was wondering if I needed to have a password on the website
- I worked on the mobile version of the website so people could access it from their phones

---

2/20/2021

- I asked a few other people if I can interview
  - The interview with the previous person who agreed to do so, did not work out
- I started working on Article 5 about designation

---

2/21/2021

- I looked over feedback on articles from Cayanne

---

2/22/2021

- I had my weekly meeting with Mr.Gay
  - Talked about how it's difficult to get people to agree to do an interview and follow up with answers
  - Discussed potential title for my project/website

---

2/23/2021

- I looked at the feedback from Cayanne on article 4

---

2/27/2021

- I met with Cayanne

- Talked about article 3 and what it needed to make it stronger
  - Combined articles 4 and part of article 2
    - Turn the second part of article 2 to its own article
  - She will help me get people to interview
- 

2/28/2021

- I got a person to agree to do an interview with me!
    - I sent him the question for the interview and he sent me his answers!
- 

3/1/2021

- Weekly meeting with Mr. Gay
    - Discussed the previous articles with their edits
    - I figured out a way to share the website with Mr. Gay and Cayanne so they can comment and leave feedback before I publish the website
- 

3/5/2021

- I contacted Zein to see if she will be willing to do an interview with me
- 

3/7/2021

- I asked another person to do an interview with me. I talked to him and sent him the questions. Waiting on his response
- 

3/10/2021

- I worked on the website on both the technical things and filling the different sections out, specifically the home page.
- 

3/11/2021

- I continued working on website and filling things out
  - I switched topics for article 5 and with the help of Cayanne, decided to researched information on the Syrian contribution to the arts
- 

3/12/2021

- Zein agreed to do an interview so I sent her the questions

- I continued researching about syrian contribution to the arts and reading various articles about it
- 

3/15/2021

- I received responses back from Zein
    - I wrote the transcript for that interview
    - I started making an audio interview for that interview
  - I asked another person if she would be willing to do an interview with me
  - I finished and downloaded the audio to the interview with Zein
- 

3/16/2021

- The person agreed to do the interview so I sent her the questions
  - I continued working on filling the website
  - I did an outline for article 5 on the Syrian contribution to the arts and I started its rough draft
- 

3/18/2021

- I continued working and eventually finished article 5 about contribution to the arts
- 

3/21/2021

- I sent Mr.Gay an email with what I did over break and wanting feedback
  - I got interview with another interviewee
- 

3/22/2021

- Instead of my weekly meeting with Mr. Gay, he took the time to look at article 5
  - I worked on refining the 2 newest interviews and making full transcripts for them
- 

3/24/2021

- I wrote a new paragraph for article 1
  - I combined a part of article 2 with article 4
  - I added a new paragraph with the rest of article 2 that is talking about “colleges and beyond”
-

3/25/2021

- I worked on filling the website more
  - Worked on the mobile version of the website too
- 

3/28/2021

- For the sixth article, I researched about the syrian contribution to writing/literature
- 

3/30/2021

- Continued researching syrian contribution to writing/literature
  - Worked on the technicalities on the website
- 

4/3/2021

- Wrote more for article 2 about going to college
  - Edited article 1
  - Sent an update to Cayanne
  - Continued filling the website
  - Starting formatting the articles the way I want them on my website
- 

4/5/2021

- Weekly meeting with Mr.Gay
    - Talked about the research articles
    - Discusses how it's challenging to get people to interview
    - I shared a link for the website so he can add comments
- 

4/9/2021

- Called Cayanne with an update on my work and talked about deadlines
  - Worked on filling up the website
- 

4/10/2021

- I was able to get another person to interview
  - I wrote transcripts for the last two interviews that I've done
  - I edited the 5th article after Mr.Gay looked at it
-

4/11/2021

- Completed the updated article 2 about going to college
    - Sent it to Cayanne and Mr.Gay for feedback
- 

4/12/2021

- Weekly meeting with Mr.Gay
    - Talked about potential topics for future articles
- 

4/15/2021

- I worked on the outline and research for article 6 about Syrian contribution to writing and literature
- 

4/17/2021

- I filled out website more
  - I worked on the rough draft of article 6
- 

4/19/2021

- I didn't meet with Mr.Gay for my weekly meeting as he had another meeting
  - I finished article 6
  - I research about the topic of translation, specifically from and to Arabic, as I thought I could write an article about it
- 

4/22/2021

- I looked for more photos
  - I could not find enough information about Arabic translation to write a research article
- 

4/24/2021

- I sent an update to Cayanne
- 

4/25/2021

- Almost finished the website
- I began to assemble things for my online book

---

4/26/2021

- I had my weekly meeting with Mr. Gay
  - We talked about different topics that I can explore like music, food and holidays
  - Discussed translation

---

4/27/2021

- I continued working on the online book
  - I added an introduction, and table of contents

---

4/29/2021

- The website is pretty much done. I just need to review it and add links to the articles and interview transcripts

---

5/1/2021

- I brainstormed new ideas of articles
  - After my sister told me about *NaTakallam*, I looked more into it and researched it

---

5/3/2021

- Met with Cayanne
  - Talked about the articles that I've written and she gave me feedback
  - Shared the interview transcripts with her
  - Looked at the website together

---

5/4/2021

- I worked on the book
- Researched more about *Natakallam*

---

5/5/2021

- I talked with Cayanne about Demo Day at Paper Airplanes and how I can access it.
- I began writing Article 7 about *NaTakallam*
- I emailed *NaTakallam* in hope of having an interview with someone from the team
- I also did a works cited page for articles 5, 6 and 7
- I continued working on assembling the book: I did a table of contents and an introduction to the "articles" section

---

5/6/2021

- I finished the article 7 about *NaTakallam*
  - I started researching about “Unpacked: Refugee Baggage” that Cayanne told me about
  - I continued assembling the book, and reviewing and editing the previous articles that I wrote
  - I used another email provided on their website to contact *NaTakallam* about possibly doing an interview with me.
- 

5/7/2021

- I started writing article 8 about “Unpacked: Refugee Baggage”
  - I began thinking about the introduction video that I needed to do. I brainstormed ideas for my presentation and exhibition.
  - I emailed John about the constraints I have for my presentation and exhibition which includes having some sort of projector or Apple TV in order to share my website
- 

5/8/2021

- I attended two sessions for Demo Day by *Paper Airplanes* where students in the “Women in Technology” program shared what they have done for their project.
    - The first sessions was Business Analytics and the second was Python Programming
  - I worked on the MLA in-text citations for various articles and I also checked my works cited pages, making sure I have the correct format.
- 

5/9/2021

- I attended the third and final session of Demo Day by *Paper Airplanes* where students in the Web Development program shared their projects
  - I worked on assembling the interviews that I currently have and putting them in the format that I wanted
  - Dina from *NaTakallam* emailed me back and agreed to do an interview with me.
    - I prepared questions for the interview
- 

5/11/2021

- In the morning, I had the interview with Dina from *NaTakallam*
- Later in the day, I had my weekly meeting with Mr. Gay.
  - I let him know that I am done with article 7 and 8 and I am currently working on article 9

- We discussed the presentation and the exhibition. He also gave me the idea of printing out something similar to business cards where I can put the URL of the website and hand it out to people in my presentation and exhibition
  - We talked about the senior project rubric and decided the percentages for each category
  - We talked about works cited pages and having a bibliography for the project as a whole
  - I finished article 9
- 

5/12/2021

- I contacted Cayanne in order to meet before next Monday
    - I share the zoom link for the presentation with her
  - I began researching information about Zain Al Rafeea who my sister told me about
    - Along with that, I researched and looked more into the movie he was in, *Capernaum*
  - I edited previous articles that I wrote so they are ready
- 

5/13/2021

- I worked on the interviews transcript from my talk with Dina
  - I started writing article 10 about *Capernaum*
- 

5/15/2021

- I reviewed all the articles that I have written
    - I added them to my online book and I downloaded them in order to put them on the website
  - I edited the learning journal
  - I reviewed all the interview transcripts that I have
    - I added them to the online book and downloaded them in order to put them on the website
  - I filmed my introduction video
  - I added all the links of the articles and interviews to the website
  - I worked on the general bibliography for the entire project
- 

5/16/2021

- I reviewed and edited my learning journal

- I met with Cayanne
    - Edited the “spotlight” articles
    - Edited the website
      - Fixed the home page, the about page and the images/videos page too
    - Talked about the presentation
  - Published the website to see if anything needs adjusting
    - Everything was good
  - I sent my introduction video to Mr. Almeida
  - I finished assembling and adding everything to my book
    - I downloaded it and added the link to my website
  - I officially published my website!!
    - Shared the link on different social media so more people have access to it
    - I also sent the link to Mr. Almeida, John and Mr. Gay
-

## *4.1 Self Evaluation/Reflection*

My goal for this project was to try and combat false stereotypes of Syria and the Middle East in general by using people on the ground in Aleppo, talking and writing about them. I hoped that I would talk about topics that are not commonly discussed when it comes to Syria and I wanted to focus on what Syria has to contribute instead of what it's lacking, as so many people know it by. I believe that I was able to accomplish my goal as I addressed different topics that relate to it, and I made a website that has all my articles and interviews. So I would call my project a success.

I have never built a website before, so this was definitely a challenge for me. I also stretched myself because usually when I talk about Syria, I talk about my own experiences. However, this project allowed me to research and talk about different topics and in more detail than I possibly ever had. I stretched myself to get to know more organizations, projects and initiatives done by Syrians but I also stretched myself by learning about other people's stories and experiences. Talking about it with others was definitely challenging but I was able to compare and contrast their stories to mine and I enjoyed hearing people's experiences.

I am very proud that I was able to make this a website that I got to share with people around here and with those back home. I am also especially proud of the articles portion of my project because I illustrated various parts of Syria and the Syrian people, I also addressed false stereotypes and highlighted different organizations. So I am proud of how the articles ended up.

One of my challenges was the building of the website. It was my first time doing anything like it and at the beginning of this process, not everything worked the way I wanted it to. So it took me a while to familiarize myself and be comfortable with the tools on the website to actually build one and continue with the project. Another challenging part was coming up with topics for my articles that would be both interesting to me and to people reading it. However, after talking with Mr. Gay, Cayanne and others, and after doing more research I was able to come up with various ideas.

If I could restart this project, I would know to start looking for people to interview sooner. I thought the articles would be the most challenging part of the project, and although it was tough to come up with ideas after a certain point of writing a number of articles, the interview portion depended on other people so I needed to focus on that earlier. I learned how to create a website which is definitely helpful for the future. I also learned how to talk about a difficult topic without blaming someone directly but still addressing the issue at hand. I learned how to tie in different components of a certain place to show its full image.

And if I had more time for this project, I would definitely keep writing more articles and maybe create a new section within the articles page itself. I would also interview more people

and hear different stories and experiences. Finally, I would try to get an organization to publish my website themselves so it can reach an even bigger audience.

I think the reasoning for doing a senior project is so you can have the experience of doing a bigger project than just a presentation for a class but actually being on your own and researching topics and ideas for your project where you eventually have a final product that you can share. You are also given the opportunity through this project to go into more details about something that interests you. This reasoning aligns with my experience as I was able to do a lot of research, diving deeper into a topic I was already interested in and coming up with a final project that I was able to share with others.

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